

Evidence shows how childhood obesity can be prevented

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Targeting children aged six to 12 with school-based programmes that encourage healthy eating, physical activity and positive attitudes to body image are among a range of interventions that can help reduce levels of obesity, according to a new review of the evidence.

While some people argue against taking action because they worry that the action could itself do harm, evidence of harm due to the interventions themselves was not found across the studies. "There is now compelling evidence that strategies can be implemented to halt the growing rates of [obesity](#) in children. We know that doing nothing is likely to result in increases of [overweight and obesity](#), particularly in countries where the prevalence continues to rise", says the lead researcher of this study, Prof Elizabeth Waters, who works at the McCaughey Centre at the University of Melbourne, Australia. The research is published in The Cochrane Library.

[Childhood obesity](#) can cause social, psychological and health problems, and is linked to obesity later in life and poor adult health.

An international team of researchers have updated a previous [Cochrane Review](#) by searching for new evidence from existing studies to see which forms of intervention could have maximum effect in helping children to avoid becoming obese. They found that since 2005 the number of trials had increased from 22 to 55. With this increased pool of information they could make a more thorough assessment of the various approaches people had taken.

Becoming obese is strongly linked to inappropriate nutrition and low levels of [physical activity](#), so unsurprisingly many of the programmes aimed to improve either or both of these [behaviours](#).

The studies varied in terms of what programmes they evaluated for preventing obesity and the degree of benefit they identified. Nevertheless, taken together the review indicates that the interventions had a positive impact on average bodyweight. "Our findings show that [obesity prevention](#) is worth investing in. Given the range of programmes included in this review, it is hard to say exactly which components are the best, but we think the strategies to focus on are those that seek to change environments, rather than just the behaviour of individuals," says Waters. The evidence identifies a number of promising policies and strategies that could be considered for implementation. These include:

Including healthy eating, physical activity and [body image](#) in school curricula.

- Increasing the number of opportunities for physical activity and the development of fundamental movement skills during the school week.
- Improving the nutritional quality of food supplied in schools.
- Creating environments and cultural practices within schools that support children eating healthier foods and being active throughout each day.
- Professional development and capacity building activities which help to support teachers and other staff as they implement health promotion strategies and activities.
- Giving more attention to parent support and home activities that encourage children to be more active, eat more nutritious foods and spend less time in screen-based activities.

"Research that aims to reduce childhood obesity must now concentrate on finding ways of embedding effective interventions in health, education and care systems, so that we can make population-wide, long term impacts on the levels of obesity," says Waters.

Provided by Wiley

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